The Ethical Dimensions of Research and Scholarship

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Candid modernity and detrimental materialism can be considered as the basis of our deviation from ethical values in present times. The basic human moralities have always been considered as the foundations of harmonious human co-existence. The need to follow ethics is being felt in every sphere of human actuality. Unfortunately, acts of violence and crime are the prevailing trends! Indeed, there is hardly any realm of human life untouched by growing dissoluteness. Similar to other ambits of our society today, research misconduct too is not uncommon. Data fabrication, falsification of results, and plagiarism are some such acts of misconduct as cited in the Guidance Document on Good Academic Research Practices published by the University Grants Commission in September 2020. This paper purports to analyse the need to uproot such unethical practices and define the prescribed and essential ethical norms.

[**Keywords :** Ethics in research, Ethics in publications, Research misconduct, Scholarship]

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1. Introduction

The expression *achar niti* in Hindi or ethics in English universalizes the significance of virtuous living. "Ethics" originates from the Greek expression "ethos", which implies manner of comportment. It examines human actions based on their appropriateness. This concern for human activity entails human responsibility after deliberation about the apt and inapt deeds. On the philosophical plane, it involves examining values to be followed in life based on universally applicable principles. Ethics also deals with moral dilemmas and moral discernment. In fine, it steers one to accomplish the good after careful pondering rather than imposing restraints. For example, a lot of intelligence is needed to design a deadly weapon, but without appropriate moral wisdom, it may be misused. Karma, an ethical concept in Indian Hindu tradition, also advances that the corollaries of one's action cannot be obviated. The primary virtues like endurance, integrity, restraint, wisdom, and truth have been a part of our Indian tradition. The ideas of dharma and niti are as old as the Indian civilization.

Ethics deals with intentional and wilful human actions. There may be many activities to do during leisure. Some read, some go out, or some listen to music, some watch a film. A voluntary action is to act by choosing one thing out of many. Since we choose our activities, the responsibility to bear the consequences is also ours. Freedom and responsibility are thus always connected. We know that natural urges and instincts primarily govern animal behaviour. Human beings can try to regulate their innate desires. Self-interest and societal interest cannot be regarded in an isolated manner, but we cleverly try to do so. The moral code maintains the balance between the two. The absence of rules leads to disorder. For example, a significant disorder occurs on busy roads as soon as traffic signals stop working in the evening. Everyone tries to plunge through the traffic. No one wants to be patient. No one is heedful of the inconvenience faced by children, older people, or disabled persons. This situation is not only chaotic but hazardous too. It increases the risk of road accidents. This example illustrates that after breaking societal rules and the system designed for their implementation, only self-regulation can save a system. The absence of regulations leads to disorder.

2. Ethics in Research

Before we talk about Research Ethics, let us define research in the simplest of words. I want to put forth the viewpoint of a Hungarian Biochemist, Albert Szent Gyorgyi. According to him, "Research is to see what everybody else has seen and think what nobody has thought". Research broadly aims to study various phenomena, develop new perceptions about them, and explain unexplored horizons of knowledge. Good research is possible only through a good researcher. A good researcher has been described as one who has the following qualities :

- Devoutness and Commitment.
- Constancy and Imperturbability.
- Good verbal and written Communication.
- Knowledge of the concerned realm.
- Originality and ingenuity.

Now, it is crucial that while maintaining high research quality, research is conducted in a culture that supports honesty and integrity to ensure the highest standards of ethical practice and behaviour. To come to the point- Research Ethics comprises of two dimensions or aspects. Firstly, Research Integrity, and Secondly, Publication Ethics. According to the US National Institutes of Health, research integrity includes the "use of honest and verifiable methods in proposing, performing, and evaluating research. Reporting research results with particular attention to adherence to rules, regulations, and guidelines" (NIH).

D. B. Resnik summarizes some ethical norms or principles that various codes of associations, government agencies, and universities worldwide have adopted concerning research work. He highlights the importance of honesty, objectivity, confidentiality, and social responsibility as some of the most significant values to be adhered to by a researcher. The promotion of ethical values leads to error-free, collaborative, and accountable research aiming at social good (Resnik).

3. Ethics in Publication

A Scholarly work is published in the form of a book with single or multiple authors, articles in research journals, conference

proceedings, and many other formats. Authors, journal editors, peer reviewers, and publishers together are involved in the publication of research output. Publication of an article in any of the above forms is an essential building block in developing an understandable and reliable knowledge network. Research and the publication process are built on trust based upon the fundamental belief that information and data are collected and reported honestly without falsification and misrepresentation. The resulting literature can be used reliably in the future. Since there are substantial career pressures to publish research outputs, unethical behaviour on the part of authors is, unfortunately, becoming more noticeable in recent times. On occasions, the examiners who evaluate a Ph.D. thesis are found appropriating the original thought of the examinee for their vested interests.

It should be noted that if a published work is subsequently found to be unreliable or dishonest, not only personal and institutional reputations are destroyed for good, research efforts building upon such published work also suffer significantly in a cascading manner. Hence, all the concerned individuals need to follow the highest standards of ethical behaviour. The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has pronounced very detailed notes on ethical practices expected of authors, editors, reviewers, and publishers. COPE, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting genuine research, defines best practices in the ethics of scholarly publishing and assists editors, publishers, etc. Its guidelines are internationally accepted and implemented.

Authorship confers credit for the work that has been carried out to result in a publication. It has many important academic, social, and financial implications. It is implicit that authorship entails responsibility and accountability for the published work. When one person authors a book, research article, or another category of research output, it is implicit that that person essentially carried out all the research work related to that publication, and they bear all responsibilities. In multi-authored publications, however, it becomes necessary to identify the contributions of each author so that their duties can be defined. Those who provide only assistance in writing, technical editing, language editing, and proofreading do not qualify to be co-authors. Some other types of authorships like guest authorship,

honorary or gift authorship, anonymous, surrogate, and ghost authorship are grossly unethical and unacceptable. Including some- body as a co-author without valuable contribution to work or excluding names of genuine contributors is undesirable and unscrupulous.

Authors need to avoid multiple submissions and publications as it is unethical and illegal to submit a research work to more than one journal at a time. Furthermore, it is unethical and amounts to plagiarism to duplicate or reformulate existing publications into new publications by willfully disguising the sources of work. Also, do not feel hesitant to do error correction in a published paper by publishing an erratum. Depending upon the seriousness of the unethical misconduct, authors may publish an 'apology' note, or editors may publish an expression of 'concern' or retract the paper. Indeed, there are ethical norms and guidelines prescribed for publishers, editors, and reviewers too. However, there are enough reasons for authors to singularly recapitulate responsibilities as researchers and contributors to the knowledge arena.

4. Conclusion

Unfortunately, in a "publish-or-perish" world, a publication can become an objective in its own right, encouraging and introducing unethical publication practices. We find scholars striving to swell the number of their publications without adding anything to the knowledge corpus. Such works do not have any social significance and are not much cited. Balanced and rightful stress on research goals and research methodology needs to be achieved in any scholarly endeavour. However, when adequately disseminated, research also adds to the collective increase in knowledge and understanding of human society and leads to technological innovations and advances which have more profound consequences. Assessment of the research output of an individual or institution also has significant implications for professional advancement. Following appropriate ethical guidelines at every step of research and its dissemination adds to the pleasure of researchers and the target audience. Research organizations, including universities, have developed their policies for the ethical conduct of research. What is lacking is a culture supported by a sound governance structure to ensure that research misconduct does not occur. The procedures and processes to address the violations fairly, promptly, and effectively are lacking, and this problem needs to be addressed!

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